

Queer Subcultures Among Students at Art Universities: Identity, Practice, and Visual Expression

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Abstract: As issues of gender diversity have entered public discourse through the Internet, the visual expression of queer communities has increasingly become an important means of constructing identity. As a distinctive social field where fashion culture and artistic practice are closely intertwined, art universities provide crucial spatial conditions for queer students' identity formation and self-expression. Drawing upon Butler's theory of gender performativity and Ahmed's politics of visibility as the theoretical framework, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen queer students from art universities across ten provinces and municipalities in China. The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis and systematic coding.

The findings suggest that queer dressing practices constitute a relatively flexible form of political action, continuously negotiated within the triple tensions of familial discipline, group belonging, and spatial oppression. Both resistance and compromise function as survival strategies through which queer individuals maintain a sense of security and subjectivity within heteronormative spaces. Furthermore, the visibility afforded to queer communities in specific environments such as art universities is conditional and constrained, making it difficult to transcend existing cultural frameworks. In addition, increased queer visibility does not necessarily lead to social recognition. A structural disjunction exists between being visible and being recognized, revealing the deep-seated control exerted by heteronormativity over public space. These findings offer a new perspective for discussing queer experiences within the Chinese socio-cultural context and contribute to the localization of queer studies in China.

Keywords: Queer Culture; Art Universities; Visual Expression; Identity Construction; Gender Performativity; Politics of Visibility

1. Introduction

Due to the influence of social traditions and dominant cultural norms, queer communities have often been marginalized or rendered invisible within mainstream society. Through social media, however, an increasing number of queer individuals have entered the public sphere, and their distinctive forms of visual expression have become recognizable social symbols. It should be noted that not all individuals who adopt unconventional styles of dress belong to queer communities. Such forms of self-presentation may likewise challenge gender stereotypes and conventional expectations. Nevertheless, queer visual expression places greater emphasis on its underlying political significance rather than merely pursuing fashion or aesthetic innovation. It represents a relatively moderate means through which individuals challenge identity constraints and create broader forms of recognition within socially regulated spaces. Art universities, as important sites that encourage the exploration of diverse styles, provide students with a broader range of possibilities for self-presentation. Within this context, the dress practices of queer individuals have attracted increasing attention. More precisely, they have become visible through dress, to the extent that certain styles have developed into recognizable stereotypes or symbols. Such symbols function as markers of visibility. Their existence indicates that increasing numbers of people have begun to recognize the presence of queer communities.

2. Literature Review

Within art universities, visual style serves as an important medium of self-expression and a significant marker distinguishing individuals

from other social groups. Researchs by Sun Tingting (2012) and Adomaitis et al. (2024) both demonstrated that the body is not a natural entity but a site of social construction[2][3]. This perspective is reflected in the experiences of art university students, among whom queer individuals are relatively free to express themselves through dress and appearance. At the same time, visual expression constitutes a political form of resistance against normative structures. Huang Xinyao (2023) argues that queer performance represents an “ironic repetition” of established gender identities[4]. Similarly, both of Wan Xiaoyu (2024) and Zou Yanglan (2021) argued that gender performativity may be understood as a strategy of political resistance[5][6]. Collectively, these studies emphasize the influence of queer culture on identity politics. Finally, the visual expression of queer culture performs a dual function with respect to norms: internal conformity and external resistance. Yang Xue (2013) notes that queer youth frequently employ bodily modifications to express identity and belonging[7]. However, the increasing fashionization of queer culture may sometimes obscure deeper forms of structural inequality. Similarly, Clarke and Turner (2007) identified the existence of internal norms within queer communities, young queer individuals continue to experience substantial pressure to conform to community expectations regarding dress, while deviations from such norms may lead to challenges to identity legitimacy or social marginalization[8]. As a result, some individuals seek to challenge these conventions through more personalized forms of expression. In conclusion, current scholarship in China has primarily focused on the relationship between queer culture and artistic practice. Existing studies have largely examined the influence of queer culture on artistic creation or have concentrated on issues of identity formation and summaries of queer fashion practices. Such research contributes to the social visibility of queer communities; however, it may also encourage public understandings of queer populations that remain at a superficial level, thereby limiting deeper forms of mutual understanding among different social groups. Furthermore, previous studies on queer communities in China have not dealt with the visual expression of queer university students and the factors shaping these practices. Research

examining the relationship between visual expression and political action also remains limited.

This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the visual expression of queer students in art universities and exploring its political significance. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the development of domestic scholarship in this field, promote broader visibility for queer communities, and advance the development of queer studies within the Chinese context.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Conceptual Definitions

The term queer was initially employed as a derogatory label directed at LGBTQ+ communities but was subsequently reclaimed and adopted as a means of resisting and subverting oppressive language. Compared with the traditional LGBT framework, the concept of “queer” encompasses a broader range of identities. In addition to sexual minority groups such as homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgender individuals, “queer” is also used in some studies to refer to “gender queer” identities, including non-binary and gender-fluid individuals.

The term spatial experience used in this study refers to the different identity norms imposed upon queer communities within different social spaces. Drawing upon Sara Ahmed's theory of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, spatial experience emphasizes how queer communities are marginalized within public spaces organized according to heterosexual norms and how they challenge and subvert such norms through dress and self-presentation[1].

3.2 Theoretical Foundations

Judith Butler first systematically developed the theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* and further elaborated on the relationship between the body and gender norms in *Bodies That Matter*, provides an important analytical framework for understanding queer subcultures among art university students. Butler argues that gender is not naturally given but is a performative existence continuously constructed through social regulation and repetitive practices[9]. From this theoretical perspective, clothing, bodily posture, and related practices become important media through which queer university students perform gender[10]. Within

the relatively free environment of art universities, clothing is not merely an aesthetic choice but also an important symbol of identity construction and self-expression. At the same time, Butler emphasizes that the repetitive performance of norms also contains the possibility of subversion. From this perspective, the deconstruction of conventional styles of dress by queer communities within art universities also constitutes a form of normative subversion and cultural resistance.

In summary, gender performativity not only explains the process through which gender is constructed but also provides a critical and practical space for understanding the visual expression of queer communities. The theory of gender performativity plays an important role in examining the relationship between identity construction and visual expression among queer communities within art universities. It helps explain how art university students utilize clothing and appearance to express their distinctive cultures, re-perform gender, and challenge normative expectations.

Accordingly, gender performativity provides the central theoretical framework through which this study examines the visual expression, cultural practices, and political implications of queer communities in art universities.

4. Research Methods

4.1 Data Collection

Data were collected through interviews. Participants who met the research criteria were first recruited through online questionnaires, after which individual interviews were conducted.

4.1.1 Interview guide design

Drawing upon Butler's theory of gender performativity and Ahmed's politics of visibility as the theoretical foundation, and employing Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality[11] and Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology[12] as the primary methodological approaches, an interview guide was developed. The interview guide covered six dimensions: identity expression, visual politics, community norms, spatial experiences, personal narratives, and future imaginations.

Following each interview, the interview guide was revised according to participants' feedback and the effectiveness of data collection. Adjustments included changes in question order

and the addition of follow-up questions where appropriate. Before each formal interview began, participants were encouraged to express their thoughts as openly as possible in order to enrich the interview content.

4.1.2 Sampling strategy

This study primarily employed convenience sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling. First, recruitment information was distributed through social media platforms such as Weibo and Rednote, and potential participants were screened according to the research criteria. Second, after each interview, participants were invited to recommend other individuals who met the study requirements, thereby facilitating participant recruitment through snowball sampling.

4.1.3 Interview process

The study primarily relied on online interviews, which were conducted through online meeting platforms. Compared with face-to-face interviews, online interviews can effectively reduce participants' pressure and discomfort, enabling them to concentrate more fully on interview questions while generating additional reflections and associations. This contributes to the richness and authenticity of the collected data.

4.1.4 Sample characteristics

A total of 13 participants were recruited for this study. The participants came from universities located in Yunnan, Beijing, Hubei, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Fujian, Shanghai, Jiangxi, Guangdong, and Shaanxi. The sample included two first-year undergraduate students, one second-year undergraduate student, six third-year undergraduate students, and four fourth-year undergraduate students.

Participants represented a variety of art-related disciplines, including oil painting and product design, and ranged in age from 19 to 24 years old. Individual interviews lasted between 20 and 70 minutes. In total, 493 minutes of audio recordings were collected and transcribed into more than 80,000 Chinese characters of textual data, providing sufficient material for the subsequent thematic analysis.

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants.

4.2 Data Analysis

The primary sources of data for this study consisted of interview recordings and interview transcripts. The qualitative data were analyzed

using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2016), thematic analysis is a method for identifying units of meaning, analyzing patterns of meaning, and interpreting qualitative data. The process generally involves six stages:

familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the report.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Age	Interview Duration
A1	Female	Lesbian	24	34min27s
A2	Female	Pansexual	21	42min01s
A3	Bigender	Bisexual	20	40min15s
A4	Male	Gay	21	1h09min54s
A5	Female	Asexual	21	24min55s
A6	Female	Pansexual	22	28min32s
A7	Female	Bisexual	21	42min19s
A8	Female	Pansexual	19	48min43s
A9	Female	Pansexual	22	48min07s
A10	Female	Bisexual	20	23min06s
A11	Non-binary	Asexual	22	32min14s
A12	Female	Lesbian	19	37min19s
A13	Female	Bisexual	21	21min35s

5. Findings

Following the coding process, four overarching themes were identified: dress as a political expression, intra-community dynamics and tensions, social regulation and negative feedback, and spatial conditions of queer visibility. The first theme dress as a political expression consisted of three subthemes: queer dress aesthetics and practices, strategic uses of dress, and style formation and influences. The second theme intra-community dynamics and tensions consisted of two subthemes: belonging and community connection and resistance and individual subjectivity. The third theme social regulation and negative feedback consisted of five subthemes: norms and their enforcement, contextual conditions of regulation, negotiation and responses, stereotypes and social perceptions, and aspirations for inclusive queer environments. And the final theme spatial conditions of queer visibility consisted of three subthemes: heteronormative regulation in public and private spaces, affective experiences of spatial regulation, and enabling conditions of queer visibility.

5.1 Themes, Subthemes, and Nodes

5.1.1 Dress as a political expression

Because this study focuses on the relationship between identity construction and clothing choices among queer communities, and seeks to examine whether styles of dress can function as

political tools that enhance queer visibility, the theme dress as a political expression emerged as a central finding and provides direct evidence for the study's research objectives.

The subtheme queer dress aesthetics and practices summarizes the dress styles reported by all participants. It consists of two nodes: distinctive queer dress practices and non-signifying dress practices. Distinctive dress practices include Gothic styles, androgynous styles, and bigender styles that challenge traditional binary understandings of gender.

The subtheme strategic uses of dress captures the ways in which queer individuals utilize clothing styles to establish boundaries, protect themselves, and communicate identity. This subtheme provides strong evidence for the political significance of dress. It consists of two dimensions: identity-oriented and interaction-oriented, representing strategies directed toward the self and toward social interaction respectively.

Within the identity-oriented dimension, four nodes were identified from the interview data: dressing enhances self-confidence, maintaining one's dressing style, specific items have specific meanings, and symbolic embodiment of queer identity. Among these, symbolic embodiment of queer identity further elaborates upon the meanings associated with specific clothing items and visual symbols.

Within the interaction-oriented dimension, two nodes were identified: dress-enhanced visibility

and risk avoidance through dress.

The subtheme style formation and influences summarizes both the origins and developmental processes of participants' stylistic preferences. It consists of the nodes exploration of dressing

style and queer style shaped by media and subcultural influences.

The original interview excerpts are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Dress as a Political Expression

Code	Illustrative Quotations
Distinctive queer dress practices	A1: I tend to prefer a punk style. A6: I think millennium fashion, Y2K, and wasteland-inspired styles are the ones I wear most often.
Non-signifying dress practices	A2: Personally, I am not the kind of person who likes dressing up specifically for photos or sacrificing comfort for appearance. A5: I feel that there are very few people from this kind of group around me.
Dressing enhances self-confidence	A7: When I was at school, I was just a very ordinary female student, but after dressing this way, some of my strengths seemed to be amplified.
Maintaining one's dressing style	A1: Most of the people I spend time with in daily life share the same identity as me, so of course I dress according to my own ideas. A12: These experiences did not really affect my style of dress.
Specific item has special meaning	A8: Probably the cross, because it is simply a very popular element, and it is one that has stayed in my memory. A13: I watched <i>Wednesday</i> some time ago, so I became very fond of the clothing associated with The Addams Family. I admire Wednesday's personality, and I think it also represents resisting mainstream expectations and pursuing what you truly want.
Symbolic embodiment of queer identity	A6: The infinity symbol is particularly meaningful to me because I think it expresses an attitude: "If it is something I love, I can have it." A9: I wear a pansexual pride ring when I go out.
Exploration of dressing style	A9: In middle school, I did not have much time to explore clothing styles. At university, I had more time, and the environment was more accepting of queer people. In this freer environment, I felt that people were standing beside me, and I could slowly begin exploring my own style.
Queer style shaped by media and subcultural influences	A4: For example, within our community, in erotic comics created for people like us, traditionally masculine and physically strong men tended to be more popular. A7: Japanese anime culture and idol culture have had a deep influence on me.

5.1.2 Intra-Community Dynamics and Tensions

This theme focuses on the internal interactions and tensions that exist within queer communities rather than treating them as a homogeneous group. During the process of expressing identity, queer communities also develop particular behavioral and stylistic reference models. While such norms may strengthen community cohesion and a sense of belonging, they may simultaneously restrict more diverse pathways of identity performance.

The subtheme belonging and community connection consists of three codes. The first code, forming connection with others, explains how participants establish relationships with particular groups through dress. The second code, seeking a sense of belonging, captures participants' efforts to locate and maintain a sense of community affiliation. The third code, style adaptation for group inclusion, describes the adjustments participants made to their styles

of dress in order to integrate into particular communities. Within this code, one participant explicitly referred to an implicit dress norm operating within queer communities, providing further insight into why some queer individuals modify their appearance in order to gain acceptance and recognition within a group.

The subtheme resistance and individual subjectivity consists of two codes. The first code, refusal to imitate for belonging, reflects the perspective of a participant who argued that altering oneself solely for the purpose of gaining belonging contradicts the characteristics of queer identity itself. From this perspective, refusing to change functions as a means of protecting individual subjectivity and demonstrates how excessive emphasis on group belonging may become restrictive for queer individuals. The second code, rejection of fixed queer symbols, summarizes the views of participants who rejected the existence of any fixed or

essentialized “queer symbols” and emphasized that queer communities should remain diverse and pluralistic.

The original interview excerpts are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Intra-Community Dynamics And Tensions

Code	Illustrative Quotations
Forming connections with others	A2: For me, this process has been a form of self-exploration, but also a way of building connections with other people. A11: To me, it feels more like an encrypted conversation.
Seeking a sense of belonging	A4: First of all, I think it represents a sense of belonging. A7: I feel a sense of being accepted and understood.
Style adaptation for group inclusion	A6: Within our community, there are certain norms, but they are not written down anywhere. A12: Back in middle school, I was going through a rebellious phase. To prove that I was really a lesbian, I felt I had to cut my hair very short and make stereotypical jokes.
Refusal to imitate for belonging	A3: I would not deliberately adopt a certain style just to fit into a group, I may prefer my own norms. A8: Sometimes we simply want to try something new for a while. But I do not want to trap myself in a particular style long-term and turn it into a social calling card. That would make me feel as though my sense of self were being diminished.
Rejection of fixed queer symbols	A2: As a sexual minority group, I do not think there are any universal symbols. Clothing is like food preferences. There may be similarities within a region, but once you look at individuals, there are many differences. A7: I do not think there are any real rules. Once you enter a subcultural community, we are already rebelling against rules and norms. Creating new rules would feel like moving backwards.

5.1.3 Social Regulation and Negative Feedback

This theme primarily summarizes participants' experiences and perceptions of regulation rooted in traditional social and cultural norms, as well as their expectations for future social environments. The findings suggest that the challenges faced by queer communities largely stem from the “orientation” of society and the evaluations and expectations imposed upon queer individuals through such orientations.

The subtheme contextual conditions of regulation explains that, in many cases, regulation does not necessarily take the form of explicit actions but rather exists as a persistent social atmosphere. This subtheme consists of two nodes: living in a conservative city and social invisibility of queer expression.

The second subtheme, norms and their enforcement, focuses on the specific social rules and practices that emerge within such an atmosphere. This subtheme is further divided into two lower-order subthemes: normative expectations and boundaries and forms of social evaluation and surveillance, both of which summarize the social norms experienced by participants and the mechanisms through which these norms are enforced.

The first lower-order subtheme, normative expectations and boundaries, consists of three

nodes: experiencing a judgmental gaze despite conforming to gender norms, judgmental feedback, and gender-normative bullying. The node judgmental feedback primarily consists of negative responses originating from family members, alongside a smaller number of negative experiences originating from broader society. The node gender-normative bullying represents a distinctive case in which participants experienced bullying associated with gender expectations and normative assumptions. Regarding the second lower-order subtheme, forms of social evaluation and surveillance, captures more specific and concrete situations in which participants encountered social regulation, thereby illustrating how social norms are enacted in everyday life. This subtheme consists of two nodes: conditional acceptance and different rules between females and males in gym settings.

Because both queer communities and art students have long been affected by stereotypes and prejudice due to the relatively low level of acceptance toward non-mainstream groups within traditional social culture, the third subtheme, stereotypes and social perceptions, summarizes the various stereotypical assumptions experienced by participants as both queer individuals and art students. This

subtheme consists of two nodes: stereotypes toward queer people and stereotypes toward art students.

The fourth subtheme, negotiation and responses, summarizes participants' responses to the forms of regulation described above. These responses can generally be categorized into two forms: passive adaptation and active resistance. The subtheme consists of the nodes adaptation and

resistance, and serves to illuminate queer individuals' attitudes toward social regulation.

Finally, the subtheme aspirations for inclusive queer environments summarizes participants' expectations regarding future social environments for queer communities.

The original interview excerpts are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Social Regulation and Negative Feedback

Code	Illustrative Quotations
Living in a conservative city	A9: I grew up in Fujian, and many of my queer friends have told me that because of family pressure or environmental pressure, they eventually choose to get married. A11: I used to feel ashamed because I grew up in a mountainous area. People there tended toward two extremes: either sex was never discussed, or people started dating and hooking up at a very young age. I used to be quite conservative.
Social invisibility of queer expression	A9: Sometimes when people come out, others simply ignore the fact that they have come out. I think that is terrible. A12: I think a deeper level of recognition is difficult to achieve in China. It can only exist as an unspoken rule or a shared understanding, but it is very difficult to bring it into the open and talk about it directly.
Experiencing a judgmental gaze despite conforming to gender norms	A11: I have to worry about whether older men on the street will whistle at me. I find it extremely annoying.
Judgmental feedback	A7: We were once asked to leave a café and a hotel while taking photos. Staff told us, "People like you should not come here." A8: To outsiders, dyeing my hair blue is seen as strange behavior. When I returned to my hometown to visit relatives last year, they looked at me in a rather unfriendly way.
Gender-normative bullying	A3: I experience bullying from heterosexual and cisgender people almost every day at school.
Conditional acceptance	A3: In my mother's view, 'gender equality' is much easier to accept than queer or transgender identities. She has not moved beyond traditional binary understandings of gender.
Different rules for women and men in the gym	A4: I often see men with their shirts off, and nobody seems to care. But women are expected to dress much more modestly.
Stereotypes toward queer people	A8: Stereotypes definitely exist. Even when I describe my style as 'alternative,' people immediately think of black-and-white stripes, artistic fonts, or unusual prints. A9: On Rednote and other platforms, people often joke about bisexuality, it is actually a very harmful thing.
Stereotypes toward art students	A2: Whenever I go home, relatives tease me by saying things like, 'Here comes the great artist,' or 'This is how art students dress.' It makes me feel uncomfortable.
Adaptation	A6: In more formal situations, such as meetings with professors or parents, I may deliberately conceal parts of my style. I do not think they would easily understand this culture, and explaining it would be troublesome. A7: When I was dating men, my style was less confrontational and more feminine, closer to what traditional men tend to prefer.
Resistance	A12: When I cut my hair short in middle school, my mother absolutely hated it. We fought intensely during that period. After years of conflict, she changed somewhat too. She stopped insisting that I keep long hair and stopped demanding that I behave like a stereotypical girl.
Aspirations for inclusive queer environments	A3: My hope is that people can generally accept the existence of queer communities. Honestly, even acceptance feels somewhat out of reach. The most important thing is recognition. People first need to acknowledge that we exist before we can discuss

	whether we are accepted. A5: This may sound selfish, but I hope people can dress however they want without receiving special treatment because of it. A9: I hope art universities will not restrict queer students' creative work. Universities should not constrain this process, nor should they restrict queer people from creating works about their own love stories. In art schools, these things should be free.
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5.1.4 Spatial Conditions of Queer Visibility

This theme primarily explains the spatial conditions that facilitate or constrain the visibility of queer communities. It summarizes the types of spaces in which participants feel secure or insecure. As an important site through which the political significance of dress and self-presentation is enacted, space plays a crucial role in shaping queer visibility. Differences in spatial paradigms and spatial structures also influence the choices queer individuals make regarding dress and self-expression.

The first subtheme, heteronormative regulation in public and private spaces, extracts participants' spatial experiences and reflections concerning the operation of heteronormative dominance within existing social spaces. This subtheme consists of four nodes.

The first node, amatonormativity, refers to a socially embedded default life trajectory and relational expectation that has become deeply integrated into collective thinking. The second node, heteronormative spatial organization, captures the concrete manifestation of heteronormative dominance within social space. As for the third node, dominance of the gender binary, reflects how participants, particularly those identifying outside conventional binary categories, experienced the influence of traditional binary understandings of gender within social spaces. Concerning the fourth node, public space oriented toward heterosexual male subjects, functions as a distinctive node that illustrates the privileged and exclusionary position occupied by heterosexual men within the heterosexual matrix.

The second subtheme, affective experiences of spatial regulation, explains the feelings of insecurity experienced by participants as queer individuals within social space, as well as participants' recognition of shared structural constraints affecting both women and queer communities. Accordingly, this subtheme consists of two nodes.

The first node, sense of insecurity, demonstrates that feelings of insecurity within particular spaces may compel queer individuals to restrict their own social and expressive space, either

voluntarily or involuntarily. Because social spaces are largely oriented toward heterosexual norms, behaviors that are relatively common among heterosexual individuals may be interpreted as forms of deviation when performed by queer individuals. The second node, structurally linked anxieties of queer and female identities, reflects participants' observations that social norms limit the full realization of self-expression. Several participants further noted that these normative constraints affect not only queer individuals but also women, revealing structural similarities between the experiences of queer and female identities.

The third subtheme, enabling conditions of queer visibility, identifies the conditions that facilitate the enhancement of queer visibility and provides insights into how spaces may become more open and inclusive. It consists of two lower-order subthemes.

The first, context-specific enabling spaces, focuses on the ways in which particular environments, such as art-related disciplines and art universities, support queer individuals' self-expression, including two nodes: freedom of expression, a descriptive node that captures observable phenomena, and context-enabled self-expression, a structural node that explains the conditions enabling such expression. The node freedom of expression encompasses the relative freedom associated with artistic creation, dress, and speech within art universities.

The second lower-order subtheme, general conditions of safety and queer presence, expands the analysis beyond the context of art universities and considers participants' experiences within broader society after leaving or moving beyond art-school environments. This lower-order subtheme consists of the nodes affirming feedback, perceived queer presence, safe space perception, and normalizing queer identity in formal settings, the latter of which was proposed by a participant as a specific condition operating within particular institutional contexts.

Positive and affirming feedback contributes to queer individuals' sense of accomplishment and

confidence in expressing themselves through dress, thereby enhancing visibility. As visibility increases, more people become able to recognize the presence of queer communities through visual expression and self-presentation, allowing queer individuals to become “seen.”

Furthermore, queer individuals' ability to identify and utilize safe spaces may help prevent the compression or restriction of their social and expressive spaces.

The original interview excerpts are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Spatial Conditions of Queer Visibility

Code	Illustrative Quotations
amatonormativity	A11: My family is fairly traditional and comes from a more rural background. Where I'm from, people see marriage and having children as the natural course of life. Being gay is considered abnormal, and not dating is considered abnormal too.
heteronormative spatial organization	A9: In a place like Fujian, if I told people that I'm pansexual, they probably wouldn't even know what that means. If I ever had to come out to my family, I would probably tell them that I'm a lesbian, because I don't really have another choice. I know that if my family found out that I also have romantic feelings toward men, I would very likely be pressured into marriage.
dominance of the gender binary	A11: There are still many people, including some at university, who are very conservative and firmly believe in an absolute gender binary.
public space oriented toward heterosexual male subjects	A4: What we call public space is often designed and managed around the traditional dominant subject. For example, with many chairs, if you're an average-height man, they feel comfortable and suitable. But if you're a woman, they can feel ill-fitting or too low.
sense of insecurity	A6: If people post videos of heterosexual couples hugging or kissing on social media, everyone just thinks it's sweet. But when my former partner and I hugged or kissed in public, people secretly took photos of us. I've also seen photos of queer people being shared online as something unusual or sensational. That creates a lot of pressure and pushes us out of public spaces. Once we leave, queer people's living space becomes even more restricted. A12: When I attend large public lectures at school, I basically don't dress up at all, because the atmosphere at my university is terrible
structurally linked anxieties of queer and female identities	A5: I think my family pays too much attention to me and sometimes interferes excessively. Since my mother was the only one looking after me, and because she's also a very anxious person, she needed ways to manage that anxiety. One way was by paying constant attention to me so she could feel that I was under control. As a result, whenever I showed even the slightest sign of being different, she would notice immediately and try to bring me back to what she considered normal. I'm never fully sure whether a space is safe, so I find it impossible not to hide parts of myself.
freedom of expression	A2: Art schools create a much less pressured environment. Feelings are connected to artistic creation. If you're too restrained as a person, I think that inevitably shows up in your work. A11: There are small bars near campus where my classmates and I talk about these topics. Some people are more outspoken and others less so. With the public climate becoming increasingly tense, people tend to relax a little more in bars and cafés.
context-enabled self-expression	A8: I definitely feel more understood at an art academy than I did in secondary school or in wider society. From my experience, whether in intensive art-training programs or at university, everyone is an art student, and there tend to be more queer people around. There's an assumption that you could be queer, which makes people much more inclusive.
affirming feedback	A5: I'm studying in Hangzhou now, and I feel the overall atmosphere is quite good. Once, a little girl came up to me on the metro and told me she thought I looked really cool.
perceived queer presence	A6: When people recognize my identity through the way I dress, it actually feels like a success to me—a success in expressing the position I want to express.
safe space perception	A8: Most of the time, I'm not entirely comfortable. The only times I wear the clothes I truly like are when I'm with my queer friends, or when I'm attending a concert I really

	love or another large event. A11: For me, it's more about specific communities. Not necessarily queer communities, but groups of people who share the same interests. A12: Sometimes I feel that only if there were literally no one else left in the world could I express my style completely and without reservation, because in the end, I'm doing it for myself.
normalizing queer identity in formal setting	A3: I feel most comfortable in academic settings where the focus is on scholarly issues, on your ideas and intellectual perspectives, rather than on expectations tied to your assigned gender and what people think you should do because of it.

5.2 Presentation of Special Cases

Through reviewing the interview transcripts, the author identified three general pathways through which participants used dress to express themselves: the typical pattern, the divergent pattern, and the tension pattern. These three categories also reflect different developmental trajectories of queer individuals under the tensions between identity formation and survival environments.

5.2.1 Typical pattern

The typical pattern is represented by participant A12. A12 is a first-year student majoring in Visual Communication at a university in Jingdezhen and identifies as a lesbian. Similar to the developmental experiences of many homosexual individuals, A12 first learned about LGBTQ+ communities through films from Hong Kong China, Taiwan China, and overseas countries at a young age, which initiated her exploration of self-identity. Because she attended an international middle school and later studied at an art high school, the relatively open and inclusive environment that continued throughout her adolescence provided opportunities to explore self-expression through dress. Influenced by film and television representations as well as early internet stereotypes surrounding “T” identities within lesbian communities. T is a term commonly used within Chinese lesbian communities to refer to lesbian who presents a relatively masculine gender expression and is often associated with traditionally masculine traits and social roles in intimate relationship. A12 believed during middle school that she needed to present herself in as androgynous a manner as possible, demonstrate a “strong sense of responsibility,” and prove herself sufficiently “tough” in order to communicate her lesbian identity to others. A12's mother attempted to make her become a “normal” woman by forcibly removing the lock from her bedroom door and requiring her to keep long hair. However, an unexpected experience led A12 to realize that

she might not need to imitate anyone in order to validate her identity. As a result, she gradually changed both her style of dress and her manner of behavior. After entering university, A12 worked part-time at a local lesbian bar, where she encountered queer individuals who did not conform to stereotypical expectations. This experience further accelerated the formation of her personal style. This demonstrates that queer dress is not merely an aesthetic choice but a practice shaped through the interaction of identity construction, self-expression, and broader sociocultural orientations.

A12's experience also reveals that the family functions as an important site of disciplinary power, with the body serving as the primary object of regulation. However, when confronted with regulation, queer individuals are not entirely passive recipients of power. Rather, they actively transform the body into a tool for self-expression and negotiation with power, while dress becomes the most everyday and least costly form of intervention. A12's trajectory moved from seeking identity validation through imitating the stereotypical template of the “Iron T” to eventually breaking away from internal community norms and developing a personal style that genuinely suited her. Likewise, A8 rejected the idea of confining herself to a single style for the sake of obtaining belonging and recognition within a community, arguing that such a practice erodes individual subjectivity.

These experiences suggest that dress is never merely a matter of stylistic preference for queer individuals. By refusing to simply reproduce normative expectations, queer individuals challenge the performative forms of gender regulation imposed through existing power structures. Yet the exploration of identity expression is rarely a linear process. Within a social environment in which gender performativity has become deeply embedded in mainstream culture, queer individuals must continuously adjust their modes of

self-expression. At the same time, queer individuals confront not only gender regulation but also forms of normative pressure operating within queer communities themselves. In pursuit of belonging and security, some queer individuals choose to modify their original styles in order to resemble more recognizable queer visual templates and thereby seek external validation. However, the temporary acquisition of belonging does not necessarily provide an effective pathway toward authentic identity expression. Instead, it may become an obstacle to the formation of diverse forms of self-expression and distinctive queer subcultures. Consequently, queer individuals engage in reiterative performances marked by subtle deviations, exploring the boundaries between the body, community expectations, and broader social structures. Faced with pressures originating both within and outside queer communities, they accumulate these deviations in ways that enhance visibility and potentially create possibilities for challenging dominant norms.

5.2.2 Divergent pattern

In contrast to the typical pattern, in which queer individuals are eventually able to express themselves relatively freely through dress, another group remains constrained by factors such as family expectations and broader social environments and is therefore compelled to adopt styles that conform more closely to mainstream aesthetics. Participant A4 exemplifies this pattern. A4 is a gay male student majoring in Experimental Art at an art university in Beijing. As the only male participant in the study, he experienced a distinct form of regulation rooted in patriarchal expectations. From an early age, he was expected to embody conventional masculinity and therefore made clothing choices according to his parents' preferences. Nevertheless, as a gay man, he never abandoned his desire to express his identity through dress. In his imagination, two ideal styles coexist. The first corresponds to a relatively recognizable form of gay male fashion that emphasizes conventionally masculine attractiveness. The second seeks to blur gender boundaries through the use of light and vibrant colors while incorporating elements from traditionally feminine garments found in Hanfu and Japanese clothing traditions, such as the *mamianqun* and *shiromuku*. Although these two stylistic ideals appear contradictory, together

they reveal his unique reflections on belonging within queer communities and on communicating identity to broader society through dress.

Although A4 generally conceals his identity in everyday life, he also attempts to express his preferences when his parents make choices on his behalf. During the interview, he recalled an occasion when his parents were selecting a backpack for him. Despite their disapproval, he chose a pink-purple backpack and purchased it with his own money. As he explained:

"I think it was a groundbreaking signal for me. It was the first time I chose an aesthetic image that went against what most people expected. I chose something considered feminine and put it on myself. Others might think it looks unnatural, but I simply think it looks good."

Just as A4 was repeatedly required to embody conventional masculinity and experienced strict parental regulation regarding dress and appearance, A5 described experiencing anxiety-driven parental control, as her mother struggled to understand why her child differed from others and employed "normal" gender expression as a means of regulation. Through long-term social reproduction, gender norms have gradually become embedded within mainstream culture and have come to occupy an important position within broader structures of power. The family functions as a micro-level unit of power through which these structures penetrate individual lives. Within the family, gender norms are repeatedly imposed upon the body through the regulation of children's clothing, hairstyles, and behavior, thereby maintaining the perceived stability of familial structures. Such forms of control gradually become naturalized through repeated performances. However, because queer individuals embody identities that diverge from what is considered "normal," they expose the discrepancy between seemingly natural gender norms and lived realities, thereby destabilizing family structures. In order to preserve this unit of power, queer individuals often experience intensified forms of gender regulation. Families strongly encourage them to perform behaviors considered appropriate to their assigned gender. When queer students remain economically dependent on their families, dress, as an external extension of the body, frequently becomes the primary target of regulation due to its visibility and accessibility. This suggests that although

family regulation constitutes one of the primary pressures faced by queer individuals, it simultaneously serves as a starting point for identity exploration.

However, within contexts where power is limited, resistance and compromise coexist as survival strategies. A4's experience demonstrates that queer dressing practices within oppressive environments do not necessarily take the form of overt resistance alone. Strategic concealment and compromise can also function as political practices through which queer individuals maintain both safety and subjectivity. Several participants reported adjusting their appearance according to context. A6 deliberately concealed aspects of their identity in formal settings in order to avoid the burden of unwanted explanations. A9 simplified her identity expression when interacting with family members by identifying herself as "homosexual" rather than "pansexual," thereby avoiding the imposition of normative expectations concerning romantic relationships. These examples suggest that compromise should not be equated with abandoning self-expression. Through strategic concealment, queer individuals are able to carve out a relatively safe space situated between social regulation and authentic self-expression, while continuing to experiment with different forms of identity expression and construct developmental pathways better suited to their circumstances. Within what Ahmed describes as spaces oriented toward heterosexual norms, queer individuals often choose to protect themselves and wait for more favorable conditions rather than prematurely exposing themselves to intensified forms of regulation. Their selective disclosure of identity to different audiences is itself a politically meaningful practice.

5.2.3 Tension pattern

Unlike most participants, non-binary queer individuals, represented by participant A3, developed distinctive dressing practices of their own. A3 is an Art History student at a university in Hubei Province who identifies as bigender and was assigned female at birth. From an early age, A3 experienced uncertainty regarding the concept of gender itself. However, family members tended to interpret these feelings merely as expressions of being a "tomboy," and the acceptance offered by A3's mother remained firmly embedded within a traditional binary framework of gender. Within this context, A3

gradually developed a distinctive style characterized by what they described as a "gender contrast," a mode of dress deeply connected to their sense of identity. Because A3 understands their gender as existing in a state of overlap, this style consists of two different modes of dress. The first involves wearing skirts that conceal bodily curves typically associated with female embodiment. Unlike conventional skirts that emphasize feminine physical features, A3 prefers loose-fitting designs and often wears a chest binder in order to blur biological sex characteristics. The second consists of trousers and outfits inspired by youthful British menswear aesthetics.

As A3 explained:

"I think the style I choose already expresses my identification with it. In a stereotypical sense, I wear women's clothes in a way that resembles men's clothing, and men's clothes in a way that feels a little more feminine."

However, such forms of dress are often interpreted merely as stylistic preferences rather than as expressions of gender identity. Consequently, A3 reported feeling most free and secure in spaces such as academic conferences and art exhibitions. Within these environments, acceptance of queer identities appears to function as a tacit consensus, allowing attention to shift away from debates about gender and toward professional and intellectual discussions. Reflecting on these experiences, A3 argued that everyone encounters moments of being a minority and that only broad and genuine social recognition can improve the conditions under which queer communities live in public space.

A3's experience demonstrates that dress practices among non-binary individuals are not simply matters of personal preference. Rather, they function as strategies through which individuals negotiate gender identity through the body and clothing while simultaneously seeking social recognition. The forms of regulation encountered by A3 extended beyond issues of sexual orientation and were also rooted in dominant binary understandings of gender. As a bigender individual, A3 continuously modified their style of dress in order to create what they described as a "gender contrast" thereby using bodily presentation to enact a non-binary gender identity. Queer individuals negotiate power through the body, and dress becomes the most direct form of practice.

A3's experience also demonstrates that specific

spaces enable visibility through their structure, yet queer feelings of safety remain conditional. The interviews suggest that art universities provide relatively favorable conditions for queer self-expression due to their generally inclusive atmosphere and encouragement of diversity. As a result, queer dress subcultures have become increasingly normalized within these environments. However, such inclusivity is not absolute. Feelings of safety remain dependent upon specific contexts, and queer visibility consequently emerges as unstable and conditional. A11 noted that the current public climate remains challenging and reported that queer friends from art schools felt comfortable expressing themselves only in bars located near their campuses. Similarly, A12 stated that she avoided expressing her preferred style in large public classes and argued that complete freedom of identity expression would only be possible in a world entirely detached from gender regulation and the heterosexual matrix. These accounts demonstrate the conditional and unstable nature of the spaces currently available to queer communities. Even relatively open art universities remain situated within broader structures of social power. Their internal environments continue to exhibit structural orientations toward heterosexual norms. Consequently, queer individuals must actively identify and navigate safe spaces. This constant process of assessment may itself constrain forms of dress and self-expression, limiting queer visibility to a relatively stable range and restricting opportunities for more expansive practices of identity formation and social recognition.

At the same time, within a society where binary understandings of gender remain dominant, queer dressing practices are frequently misunderstood, and their meanings are flattened and reabsorbed into traditional gender frameworks. Under such circumstances, being seen does not mean being recognized, and the politics of queer visibility remains incomplete. The visibility achieved through queer dressing practices cannot be automatically translated into broader social recognition of queer identities. The structural gap between visibility and inclusion represents one of the central challenges confronting contemporary queer political practice. A6 described a similar experience from a different perspective. Within public spaces oriented toward heterosexual norms, displays of

affection between A6 and their same-sex partner frequently attracted curious or voyeuristic attention, and other same-sex couples around them often encountered similar situations. In these contexts, actions that would be considered ordinary when performed by heterosexual couples are not granted the same legitimacy when performed by queer individuals. Instead, they are often perceived as challenges to dominant cultural norms. Through the repeated reproduction of heteronormative practices, some queer individuals retreat into spaces they perceive as relatively safe, further compressing the already limited social spaces available to queer communities and making it increasingly difficult to expand visibility. A12 similarly argued that contemporary social acceptance of queer communities often functions merely as an unwritten rule. Such tolerance implicitly establishes boundaries around acceptable forms of queer expression and separates queer individuals from full participation in public space. When queer communities attempt to move beyond these boundaries and transform implicit tolerance into broader social recognition, they frequently encounter resistance, including forms of opposition even more intense than those discussed above. Consequently, queer dressing practices alone cannot fundamentally transform long-standing dominant cultural frameworks within a short period of time. Visibility is therefore a necessary condition for recognition, but it is not a sufficient one. Increased visibility alone cannot secure an equal social position for queer individuals. The gap between being seen and being recognized reveals the operation of power within the heterosexual matrix and its deeper structural control over public space.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how queer individuals employ dress practices as a political act through which they construct identity and negotiate space.

Using a qualitative research design, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen eligible participants based on twenty-two core interview questions. Approximately 80,000 words of interview data were collected and analyzed through thematic analysis, resulting in four major themes.

The findings suggest that identity practices among queer students in Chinese art colleges

follow a chain-like developmental process. Gender regulation, operating through the family as a mechanism of power, positions the body as the primary object of discipline. Consequently, queer individuals employ dress as a tool for negotiating with regulatory power, imbuing clothing practices with political significance and gradually exploring possibilities for challenging power relations and gender norms.

At the same time, within spaces oriented toward heterosexual norms, strategic concealment and compromise emerge as important pathways through which queer individuals protect themselves. Because even relatively supportive spaces such as art colleges remain embedded within the heterosexual matrix, queer identity practices continue to face significant constraints. The structural dominance of heteronormativity limits the expansion of queer visibility and creates substantial barriers between visibility and social recognition. As a result, the politics of visibility remains an ongoing and unfinished project.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that dress practices among queer students in Chinese art colleges possess clear political significance, operating across three interconnected dimensions: bodily negotiation, spatial contestation, and practices of visibility.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

This study adopts a semi-structured interview approach. The following questions are grouped into thematic sections, with flexible follow-up prompts based on the participant's responses.

Background Information

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself? For example, what is your major and year of study?
2. Do you consider yourself queer? How do you understand the term "queer"?
3. How would you describe your gender identity and sexual orientation? (Please feel free to express yourself in your own words.)

Gender Identity and Expression

4. When did you first become aware of your gender identity or sexual orientation? What did this process mean to you?
5. Within the environment of an art university, do you feel freer to express yourself than you did in secondary school or in broader society? What aspects of this environment contribute to that feeling? Could you provide an example?
6. How do you express your identity or attitudes through your everyday style of dress? Do you have any particular stylistic preferences?

The Political Significance of Dress as Visual Expression

7. At what stage of your life did you develop your current style of dress?
8. When your style of dress changed, did it have

any impact on your life? Have you ever experienced misunderstandings, questioning, or hostility because of your appearance? Did these experiences influence your subsequent clothing choices? Could you provide an example?

9. Can you recall situations in which your clothing led others to identify you as belonging to a particular identity category, such as queer or gender non-conforming? What did such recognition mean to you?

10. How do you understand the idea that dress can be a form of political practice?

Community Norms and Anti-Normative Practices

11. Do you think there are particular style norms or stereotypes regarding dress within queer communities?

12. Have you ever intentionally imitated a particular style of dress in order to fit into a certain community or social circle? Was there a period when this was especially noticeable?

Visibility and Spatial Experience

13. In what kinds of spaces do you feel most able to freely express your identity through dress and appearance, such as university, social media, or social gatherings? Why?

14. Are there any spaces in which you feel unsafe or feel the need to conceal aspects of yourself, such as classrooms, cafeterias, or public streets?

15. Sara Ahmed argues that public space is oriented around heterosexual bodies. How do

you understand this statement? Have you experienced this form of spatial pressure in everyday life? Could you provide an example?

Personal Narratives and Experiences

16. Could you share an experience in which your style of dress helped you find a sense of self or express resistance?

17. Is there a particular visual symbol, accessory, or item of clothing that holds special significance for you? What does it represent?

Ideal Self and Future Imaginations

18. If there were no social constraints, what style, appearance, or way of presenting yourself would you most like to adopt? Do you feel that this form of expression has been realized at present?

19. What kinds of support or understanding would you like art universities and society to provide for queer communities?

20. If you could say one thing to the public about dress and queer communities, what would it be?

Closing Questions

21. Has today's conversation prompted you to reflect on any feelings or experiences that you had previously overlooked?

22. Is there anything else you would like to add? Are there any aspects of queer communities that you would like others to better understand? What are your hopes for the future living conditions and social environment of queer communities?